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THE POWER OF THE BOOK.

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A SURVEY OF THE PRESENT STATE OF BIBLIOTHERAPY INDICATES THAT MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED BEFORE THIS DISCIPLINE CAN DEVELOP INTO A MORE EXACT SCIENCE. DEFINITIONS OF BIBLIOTHERAPY VARY FROM SIMPLY "THE USE OF READING IN THE TREATMENT OF THE SICK" TO DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE LIBRARIAN AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE DOCTOR AND PATIENT. RESEARCHERS IN THE FIELD AGREE, HOWEVER, THAT READING, AS PART OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S PAST LIFE, AFFECTS HIS PERSONALITY AND HIS PRESENT OUTLOOK, AND THAT CONTROLLED READING AS VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE MAY HELP HIM MODIFY OR ACCEPT HIS ATTITUDES TOWARD LIFE. ALTHOUGH AVAILABLE STUDIES ARE INADEQUATE FOR DECISIVE CONCLUSIONS, BIBLIOTHERAPY COULD BECOME A VALUABLE TOOL WHEN RESEARCH HAS BEEN CARRIED OUT IN SUCH AREAS AS (1) THE EFFECTS OF SPECIFIC BOOKS ON CERTAIN TYPES OF PATIENTS, (2) THE RELATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL READING BACKGROUND AND PERSONALITY ADJUSTMENT, (3) THE METHODS OF MEASURING BEHAVIORAL CHANGE EFFECTED BY BIBLIOTHERAPY, AND (4) THE FEASIBILITY OF WRITING BOOKS FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF PATIENTS. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ENGLISH TEACHER," VOL. 7 (DECEMBER 1967), 21-24.) (LH)

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THE POWER OF THE BOOK

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This presentation surveys some of the basic philosophies concerning bibliotherapy and discusses some of its implications for librarians and educators. It is not intended to draw any definite conclusions by this means. Practical conclusions will eventually result from further research in this comparatively new field of science. Instead, the purpose of this discourse is to focus the attention of the reader upon the tremendous potential of bibliotherapy presently available but as yet pathetically undeveloped.

As a basis for further discussion and understanding, it is necessary to define the term "bibliotherapy". Even authorities in this field differ with respect to the denotation and connotation of the term. There are those who define bibliotherapy very simply as the use of reading in the treatment of the sick.¹ Without further definition of the term "sick", there is little to be gained from that source. Webster's Third International Dictionary (1961) defines bibliotherapy as "the use of selected reading materials as therapeutic adjuvants in medicine and psychiatry; also: guidance in the solution of personal problems through directed reading." A further and more comprehensive analysis of bibliotherapy is contained in a composite statement based on a 1961 research project in which questionnaires were completed by librarians, psychiatrists, educators, and sociologists. This statement reads as follows:

Bibliotherapy is a program of selected activity involving reading materials, planned, conducted, and controlled as treatment under the guidance of the physician for emotional and other problems. It must be administered by a skilled, professionally trained librarian within the prescribed purpose and goals. The important and dynamic factors are the relationships which are established, the patient's reactions and responses,

¹Ruth M. Tews, "Introduction", *Library Trends*, October, 1962, p.98.

the reporting back to the physician for interpretation, evaluation, and directions in follow-up.²

Even such a comprehensive analysis of bibliotherapy leaves others to wonder whether a truly professional librarian could serve the same purpose as a physician serves in the field of medicine.

One of the few studies to produce any definite evidence concerning the dynamics of bibliotherapy was done by Caroline Shrodes in 1949. Her study reveals three processes which correspond to phases of psychotherapy. First she proposes identification as an adaptive mechanism by means of which the reader, largely unconsciously, increases his esteem for himself by affiliating with another person or persons. Next she identifies catharsis to denote the uncensored and spontaneous release of emotion. Finally, through identification and catharsis, comes insight which is described as the emotional awareness of motivation.³ The actual role of the therapist in this process has not been fully developed. Even less is known about the effects of bibliotherapy on different individuals; therefore, accurate prescription is extremely difficult. Further research in the areas of diagnosis, prescription and its effects, as well as the actual relationship of the therapist to the reader, is long overdue.

Although interest in bibliotherapy as a science has been shown only recently,

...the written word has always been recognized as a potential force for good or evil, for pleasure and relaxation, for pain and despair. There has developed a reverence for the power of books over the minds of men, witness the book burnings and bannings of the immediate past and present.⁴

However, there appears to be a general tendency for people to emphasize the direct academic benefits derived from reading and

²Tews, *op.cit.*, p.99.

³Evalene P. Jackson, "Reading Guidance: A Tentative Approach to Theory", *Library Trends*, October, 1962, p.121.

⁴Geneva R. Hanna and Mariana K. McAllister, *Books, Young People, and Reading Guidance*. New York: Harper and Row, 1960, p.167.

forget the more subtle but equally important effects upon the psychological and sociological behavior of individuals. Educators give very careful thought to the selection of books for retarded readers but fail to make equal provisions for the maladjusted reader. What educators fail to recognize is that a self-prescribed form of bibliotherapy is constantly occurring among those who read what they think is best for them. This is the patent-medicine type of therapy in which the individual swallows an aspirin to relieve the pain without making any real effort to cure the basic ailment. The maladjusted young readers of this type usually seek books as a refuge from reality. In this group are the escape-literature artists who continually resort to this crutch without any real intent of using it as a means of progressing toward independence. These are the young people who revel in the glory of make-believe heroes without any attempt to raise their own status toward such worthwhile goals. These are the self-medication readers who require careful examination, expert guidance, and professionally selected prescriptions. The professional librarian, the classroom teacher, and the guidance counsellor must recognize their individual and combined responsibilities for directing so powerful a force.

Since our knowledge of bibliotherapeutic methods is limited, there is a real need to make people aware of its potentialities. For people in education this means that librarians, teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators must first be convinced that books possess a very realistic power over the minds and actions of those who read them. Psychologists are continually trying to trace abnormal behavior to some experience in a person's past without giving much thought to the fact that the vicarious experiences gained through reading may be equally responsible. In prescribing for the abnormal, experience patterns are often controlled or changed within the individual's environment. In conjunction with such treatment, it is quite possible to prescribe vicarious reading experiences which might even be more suitable than the firsthand experiences which are so often very difficult to control. At any rate, making educators aware of the potentialities of bibliotherapy must lead to a directed program of experimentation in both preventative and therapeutic guidance in reading. Before bibliotherapy can truly be classified as a science, there must be sufficient agreement concerning definite techniques that will enable one to prescribe certain books for certain patients with certain known results.⁵ There is little doubt that eventually

⁵Artemisia J. Junier, "Bibliotherapy: Projects and Studies with the Mentally Ill Patient", *Library Trends*, October, 1962, p.138.

books will be written specifically for certain types of patients. In the meantime, researchers should make much greater use of the resources presently available. Experiments should be set up to determine the reactions of certain type individuals to certain types of books. Extreme cases of personality maladjustment among avid readers could be examined in terms of the individuals' reading backgrounds. Even this type of survey may show some relationships between types of literature and behavior patterns of the readers. Avid readers of this kind would also lend themselves to various experiments designed to create measurable changes in behavior through the use of bibliotherapy. This type of experimentation is long overdue, and unfortunately educators who have relied so heavily upon books as a major tool toward developing the minds of youth are neglecting the challenges which bibliotherapy brings before them.